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QUENTIN MASSYS THE ELDER.



ALTHOUGH Quentin Massys—or, as the name used till recently to be generally spelt in England, Matsys—is one of the great historic names of Art, the sound of which everybody knows, his reputation in England is probably grounded on fewer facts than that of any other painter of so high an order. This is due partly to the few pictures he painted, partly to the little that is known about his life, and partly to the fact that there is no important work of his in England, except the celebrated ‘Misers’ at Windsor. That he painted these ‘Misers,’ that he was a blacksmith, and that there is a romantic story that he resigned the hammer for the paintbrush to gain a bride, probably to this day represents the average knowledge of himself and his works current in this country.

Like most knowledge of the kind, it is insufficient and inaccurate. Although the fame of the ‘Misers’ is not, perhaps, unduly great as a piece of painting, its merit in this particular is not its only claim to consideration, and it is a disparagement to the higher work of Massys that this picture should be the basis of his reputation; and though we need not quite banish to the realm of myth the delightful story of his wooing, the title of blacksmith does not fairly represent to English ears the artist who could fabricate such elegant pieces of ironwork as those which decorate the well at Antwerp, the font at Louvain, and the tomb of his first wife at Aerschot, all of which are ascribed to him.

Had Quentin Massys painted nothing but his ‘Misers’ and other pictures of a like class, he would have deserved a high place in Art, not only on account of technical skill, but as an originator; for these character pieces are the earliest pictures in which an artist has deemed the portrayal of human character, apart from portrait or history (secular or religious), sufficient motive for a picture. But great as is his title to special recognition as one of the apostles of secular Art, the brother of Meekenen and Dürer, and the artistic ancestor of the whole school of *genre* painters, it is in his great renderings of scenes from sacred and legendary history, as in the great altar-pieces now in the Museums at Antwerp and Brussels, that the extraordinary originality as well as power of his genius is revealed. In these he shows himself not only a great painter, but a poet, who can imagine great scenes of terror and pathos with a combination of force and beauty equalled by no northern artist of his time. It is said that he never went to Italy, and if this be the case, the production of such a work as the altar-piece which he painted for the fraternity of St. Anne at Louvain seems little less than a miracle. Scarcely less wonderful, as an advance in modern spirit, though less Italian in character, is the famous altar-piece at Antwerp. In both he appears as the first Flemish artist to subordinate the landscape and the detail to human expression. Not content, as the Van Eycks and Memlinc had been before him, to tell his story by arranging small figures in appropriate attitudes in a beautiful landscape, making of the whole a scene remarkable more for its arrangement and colour than for any attempt to express the sentiments of the actors, he drew his figures large, and relegated the landscape to the background, throwing his whole power into the drawing of the human form and the expression of human passion. But while he thus strode in front of his countrymen, he abandoned nothing of the beauty which they had felt. His landscapes have all their beautiful and tender tree-drawing, all their luminous depth of blue air; and the same distinctly Flemish force and individuality of character which we trace with so much delight in the numerous and noble heads in the famous ‘Adoration of the Lamb,’ we find in his faces also, however strongly moved by emotion; the same pure brilliant hues and transparency which make the earliest Flemish pictures still glow like gems, glorify his own with undiminished lustre. Whether or not he went to Italy, he went out and met the Italians in spirit. While Albrecht

Dürer was drawing ungainly figures, and contorting his draperies into the most unlovely of folds, Massys, with a sense of beauty of form and harmony of line unknown to his greater contemporary, clothed handsome men and comely women in robes of flowing grace. On the other hand, the influence of Italian Art had not on him the baneful effect which it had on his contemporary Mabuse, or on the later Italianisers, such as Otho Venius; it beautified without effeminating either his form or his sentiment. He stood between the stiff realistic masters of the past and the graceful idealists of the future, clinging to all that was noble in the one, yearning to all that was beautiful in the other, painting living men and women as he saw them without idealization, but choosing appropriate and beautiful models, and filling their faces with emotion natural to the part they had to act.

The exact date when Quentin Massys was born is not known, but it was about 1466, or twenty-six years after the year which saw the death of John Van Eyck and the birth of Hans Memlinc, and more than a hundred years before the birth of Rubens, the next great genius of the Flemish school. It may help the reader to estimate his chronological position among great artists to state that Giovanni Bellini was then forty years old, Leonardo da Vinci a youth of fourteen, and that Michael Angelo, Titian, and Raphael were born nine, eleven, and sixteen years after him respectively, while Albrecht Dürer was his junior by some five years. There has been much dispute as to whether Quentin was born at Louvain or Antwerp, but recent researches amongst the archives of the Church of Notre-Dame, in the latter town, prove the existence of a family of his name resident at Antwerp for some years anterior to his birth, and the arguments for Louvain may be said to be demolished by the writer of the article on the artist in the excellent catalogue of the Museum at Antwerp. The most probable assertion which can therefore be made about his birth is, that it took place at Antwerp after the year 1460; but the first incontestable fact which is known of his history is that he was received as a master by the famous guild of St. Luke at Antwerp in 1491, at which time he was probably from thirty to thirty-five years of age, as he is said to have exercised the craft of a blacksmith before he turned painter. The only story relating to a period before this is that already alluded to of his first love, which, though dismissed by the writer in the Antwerp catalogue as apocryphal, is too pretty to be lost, and, we may add, not sufficiently disproved, for though there is no contemporary authentication of it, the story must have been current not long after his death, as in 1572 it formed the motive of the lines by Lampsonius, which were composed for the portrait of Quentin, published at Antwerp by Hieronymus Cock in that year. The most important opponent of the tale is Charles Van Mander, who ascribes his change from the forge to the studio to a serious illness, which caused him to seek occupation in illuminating pictures of the saints while too weak to wield the hammer, and thus to discover his genius for colour and to acquire a taste for painting. This tale, though not so romantic, is still an interesting one, and the reader is at present at liberty to adopt either explanation: that he began life as a blacksmith or artistic worker of iron all his biographers are agreed.

The love story, if false, is a good instance of the vitality of traditions of a romantic character, for Lampsonius’s lines, in which that learned poet makes good use of Vulcan and Venus, are, as it were, echoed in the epitaph on the monument set up in Antwerp Cathedral to commemorate his centenary. This tablet, now removed to the Museum, contains the often-quoted line—

“Connubialis amor ex mulcibre fecit Apellem.”

The great estimation in which Massys was held personally, and the reputation of his works, make it remarkable that so few

details of his life have come down to us. We are told that he was a great friend to music and poetry, and on intimate terms with the men of letters at Antwerp; that Erasmus and Petrus Ægidius sent their portraits by Massys to Sir Thomas More, who celebrates him in elegant Latin verse. We know, from a record in Albrecht Dürer's Diary of his visit to the Low Countries (1520-21), that he went to the house of "Master Quentin," and we know that he lived in Antwerp till his death, occupying first a house in the Rue des Tanneurs, and then another in the Rue des Arquebusiers; that he was married twice, and had six children by his first wife, Adelaide Van Twylt—Peter, James, John, Quentin, Paul, and Catherine; that he died in the latter half of the year 1530, or the beginning of 1531, leaving his second wife, Catherine Heyens, a widow with seven children—Quentin, Hubert, Abraham, Petronella, Catherine, Claire, and Susanne. The names of four of his pupils—Ariaen, Willem Muelenbroec, Eduwart Portugalois, and Hennen Boechmakere—may be said

to close the tale of the authentic records of his life. It is, however, right to mention that in M. P. Génard's "De Vlaemsche School," published in 1855, is an extract from a MS. attributed to Molanus, in which it is stated that Quentin was born at Louvain, and that after having exercised the craft of a smith he learnt painting under Roger Van der Weyden (the younger) at Brussels, and then settled at Antwerp. Van Mander, on the other hand, asserts that he had no master. Fortunately the meagre details of his life are not all that is left to us. In his pictures, though these are very few in comparison with the length of his life and the greatness of his fame, we are able to study not only his genius, but in a measure himself also; for though it is not safe, as a rule, to divine the nature of an artist from his works, we cannot be wrong in ascribing a width of sympathy, a confident reliance on his great gifts, and reverence for those of others, an original outlook upon the worlds both of nature and Art, a capacity to feel deeply and distinguish



The Burial of Christ. (Antwerp Museum.)

truly, a warm heart and a sound head, to this smith and painter of Antwerp.

His pictures, other than portraits, may be divided into two very distinct classes—religious pictures and those which have been not inappropriately termed his "money pieces." The most celebrated of the latter are the Windsor 'Misers,' the 'Banker and his Wife,' in the Louvre, and 'The Accountant,' in the Museum at Antwerp. The success of these novel works begot a number of imitators, amongst whom were his son John, a German named Joest, and Marinus Van Ryomerswalen, or Reymerswalen, to whom is now ascribed the 'Money Changers' in the National Gallery (Wynn Ellis gift), formerly attributed to Quentin Massys. Of his religious paintings the only examples in England of the existence of which we are aware are the 'Salvator Mundi,' and the 'Virgin Mary' in the National Gallery, replicas of which are at Antwerp, Heidelberg, and Turin. There is a Magdalen, half-length, three-quarter size,

in the collection of the widow of James Rothschild, in Paris, and a St. Jerome in the Lichtenstein Gallery at Vienna; but if we except the picture now in the Hermitage of St. Petersburg, and formerly in the Cathedral of St. Donatian at Bruges, which represents the Virgin and Child on the crescent hovering in heavenly glory, attended by angels playing upon instruments, with God the Father and the Holy Ghost above, and below a group worshipping, composed of King David, the Roman Emperor Augustus, two prophets, and two sibyls, he left nothing to compare in importance with the two great altar-pieces which we now proceed to describe.

That which is generally called his masterpiece, but which in some respects is excelled by the other, is now in the Museum at Antwerp, and was commissioned in 1508 by the Guild of Joiners or Cabinet-makers at Antwerp, and placed in their chapel in the cathedral. For it he was to receive the small sum of 300 florins, or about £25, payable in three instalments; but even this agreement

was not carried out, as in 1511 the payment of the capital was commuted into an annuity to two of his children. Both Philip II. of Spain and Queen Elizabeth tried to purchase it, the latter offering for it the large sum of 5,000 rose nobles, which the Guild of Joiners would have accepted but for local opposition. It was bought in 1580 by the town of Antwerp for an annuity of 50 florins, and deposited in the Hôtel de Ville. In 1589 it was placed in the cathedral, whence it was removed in 1798, to save it from sale by the French. It has now found a safe home in the Museum at Antwerp.

The outsides of the wings are painted *en grisaille*, with figures of St. John the Evangelist and St. John the Baptist; the insides with the martyrdom of the two saints. On the right Salome has brought the Baptist's head to her mother, who is

seated at table with Herod, and, with the barbarous instinct of mutilation, is cutting the noble forehead with a knife; on the left the Evangelist is writhing in his caldron of oil, the fire under which is being fed with faggots by two savage scoundrels, who seem to thoroughly enjoy their task. As realistic pictures of cruelty and horror, these paintings have never been excelled. In the former the sense of tragedy is felt in the contrast between the calm dignity of the lifeless head, and the vapid frivolity of Salome and her mother. Herod himself, savage and swarthy, seems more capable of generous impulse than these cruel, cold-hearted women. In the latter the demoniac faces with which the tortured figure of St. John is surrounded are contrasted with the lovely face of a youth, who has climbed a tree and is looking down upon the scene, with an expression which it is difficult to fathom.



Exterior of the Volets of the Altar-piece in St. Peter's, Louvain.

The central picture represents the entombment of Christ. The figures are the size of life. Stretched at the bottom of the canvas lies the body of the Saviour, emaciated and stiff with death. No attempt is made to soften the physical horror of a dead body, or to glorify it with inherent divinity. Kneeling by his side, with her face towards the spectator, is the Virgin in a blue mantle, who with clasped hands is wailing and weeping in an ecstasy of grief, but with features that retain their dignity; to the right of her is Mary Salome sustaining the left arm of Christ with one hand, and lifting up the other for a sponge which another woman standing behind (between her and the Virgin) is giving to her. Mary Magdalen is wiping with her hair the blood from one of Christ's feet. Standing at our Lord's

head, Joseph of Arimathea, in richly embroidered robes, holds the sacred head in his hands, while Nicodemus supports it on his knee. Behind Nicodemus is a man in a turban holding the crown of thorns, and to his left is St. John supporting the Virgin. Another holy woman, supposed to be Mary the wife of Alpheus, stands with clasped hands behind Mary Salome, and completes the group. Behind is the Mount of Calvary, with the three crosses, two of which still bear the thieves. At the foot of the empty cross two women are collecting the blood of our Saviour in a cup. On the right, below, is seen the tomb prepared; on the left a distant prospect of hilly country and the city of Jerusalem.

(To be continued.)